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ABSTRACT

The operating assumptions and the value of the University of Vermont's Advising Referral Center were evaluated during a university-wide program review process. The centralized office supplements a faculty advising system and is designed to promote consistency and improvements in advising practices within the university. It serves as a communication link between the students and the faculty and administrators. As the center has developed, its emphasis has shifted from reacting to students' academically related problems to focusing on advising as a total system. The advising unit's goals may be divided into three broad areas: to assist students in decision making, help faculty to be better informed and skilled advisors, and foster a climate whereby administrators officially reward advisors. The center's activities include: reaching and assisting students and referring them to other resources when appropriate; responding to requests from colleges/schools/departments or individual faculty for support and guidance in advising; conducting seminars and workshops for faculty; acting as a catalyst for faculty and academic units to develop and evaluate their advising missions; and making the university aware of the needs of special groups of students. The last area was addressed through programs for nontraditional and reentry students, development of course descriptions and handbooks for transfer students and minority students, and a survey of transfer students' needs. (SW)

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SELF-STUDY OF A CENTRALIZED ADVISING UNIT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

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1979

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INTRODUCTION

The recently implemented program review process at the University of Vermont (UVM) provided impetus for a systematic process to test the operating assumptions and value of the University's Advising Referral Center, a centralized academic advising unit.

The review process joins individual programs with central administration in establishing institutional policies. Further, it provides a standardized procedure for communicating program activities and accomplishments to the parties of the review: constituency groups, external reviewers, and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The overall goal of the Program Review process is program improvement; an important by-product of the process is a clear understanding of the linkages between programs, constituency groups and administrative units.

One of the more important steps in the Program Review is a self-study. This self-study is based on issues identified concurrently by a coordinating committee of peers and the persons charged with preparing the self-study report.

The final step in the Program Review process is the development of a memorandum of understanding with the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs to clarify the position of both parties regarding the goals and objectives as defined in the self-study and the means of effectuating them.

The following self-study report is the response of one unit to the self-study component of UVM's program review process. The unit is the Advising Referral Center, a centralized academic advising office, supplementing a faculty advising system that serves more than 7000 undergraduates.

A DEFINITION OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

Academic Advising involves a set of processes which help students derive the full benefits of their education. This set of processes includes the development of a relationship between advisor and advisee that is sensitive to advisee needs and aspirations while enhancing opportunities for advisees to make their own academically-related decisions. Advising is an activity carried on by most University offices and officers and can be defined as: "...that activity where the focus is upon assisting students to become aware of, to select, and to pursue educational courses and experiences that will promote their educational and personal welfare while in college and in the years that follow."[1] The quality of advising is tied to the recognition of its role in the students' total education and the cognizance of its link to student retention.

The particular goals of advising are (a) to establish a personal relationship between faculty, administration and students, (b) to help students develop their self-confidence in relationship to educational and personal goals, (c) to help students understand and benefit from academic program policies and procedures, (d) to help students articulate their needs and interests, (e) to help students conceptualize their present situation and future possibilities, (f) to prevent problems and stresses from becoming unmanageable, (g) to facilitate the students' successful completion of their course of study, (h) to make available written materials to students that will aid them in their decision making, and (i) to provide information and data to faculty and administration which enables them to better fulfill the University's mission to students and society.

Within every school and college, today's students are a more diverse group than ever before (culturally, economically, academically, generationally and in their visions of life pursuits). Educational resources must also be diverse to meet all these special needs and aspirations. Resources within this University are working

to meet these needs, sometimes in very different ways. Most colleges and schools have their own policies and systems developed to guide students to the completion of their course of study. These policies and procedures, related to standards of excellence, are explicit and related to the philosophical foundations of each college. Therefore, policies and procedures may differ widely from one college to the next.

As desirable as this diversity may be in most ways, there are common challenges presented by today's student body to the University as a whole, those of accountability and relevance; yet responsive advising on a University-wide basis demands another measure of accountability that can best be ascertained by the degree of consistency provided within the total advising system. The creation of the Advising Referral Center underscored the importance of advising to the students' educational development, the need to advocate consistent advising practices within the University, and the desire of this University to improve its advising practices.

NEEDS TO WHICH THE CENTER RESPONDS

Prior to the Center's inception, University-wide committees and surveys of faculty and students revealed that the quality of academic advising in some of UVM's colleges and schools was better than others. The report submitted by the President's Committee on Academic Advising in 1975[2] documented broad dissatisfaction with the University's advising process as well as widespread inconsistencies in the advisors' functions.

The Center was mandated to respond to these deficiencies by serving as a communication link between the students and their primary resources, i.e., faculty, administrators, and other University offices.

At a time when academic advising was a low priority within the total functions performed by faculty and administration, the Center's role was to react to students' concerns and dissatisfactions. That role, albeit important at the time, changed as

it was recognized that a system to prevent problems from occurring and to promote student satisfaction was needed.

It seems reasonable to make the assumption that faculty members who are charged with advising need structured and planned opportunities to become more skilled in that role. Equally important, these faculty need to have confidence that advising is considered important by their department, college and university.

Through the years at UVM, faculty members have been rewarded by salary adjustments, promotion and tenure for the quality of their teaching, research and service. They may be told that advising students is expected of them, but the University has offered no universally acceptable benefit, in the context of a tangible reward system for advising efforts. Faculty cite this lack of a tangible reward system as the basis for their reluctance to become more seriously invoived in an advising capacity. They have no reason to believe that it is important to be an effective advisor. Furthermore, subsuming advising under "teaching" in the rewards formula serves to discredit its overall importance in the eyes of the advisor and student.

MAJOR GOALS AND DIFFERENCES FROM OTHER ADVISING UNITS

Advising programs and advisors need advocacy to reach the goals reflected in the University's philosophy and mission statements concerning responsible and equitable advising. The Advising Referral Center provides that advocacy. The primary goal of the Center is: to maintain, improve, and advocate the quality of advising on a University-wide basis.

As the Center has developed, its emphasis has shifted from reacting to students' academically-related problems to focusing on advising as a total system that needs recognition, assessment and guidance. Therefore, the Center's specific goals fall into three broad areas:

A. Student Decision-Making

To assist students in making decisions that meet their specific academic needs, thereby solving or avoiding problems.

B. Faculty Development

To assist faculty to become better informed and skilled advisors.

C. Promotion of Academic Advising

To foster a climate whereby administration will officially recognize and value advising and advisors, in terms of a tangible reward system.

The overall goal of the Advising Referral Center is congruent with other University resources; that is, to help students to realize their maximum educational benefits. Specific goals are intentionally different from those of other advising services within the University. For example, the major goal of the Counseling and Testing Center involves the emotional well-being of the student; the major goal of Career Planning and Placement involves jobs in the future; the major goal of the Instructional Development Center involves the improvement of the quality of instruction; while the major goal of the Advising Referral Center is the improvement of the quality of advising. Of course, all of these goals are interconnected within individual students, but each resource is prepared to deal most effectively with certain aspects and to refer others to the appropriate person or group.

THE MEANS OF REACHING THE GOALS AND THE RATIONALE FOR THESE ACTIVITIES

The Advising Referral Center is a central link in the total advising system. Its comprehensive goal is being achieved through the following means:

1. Making contact with students, with special emphasis on the students who are undecided about some aspect of their academic planning; and serving as a primary link between students and other resources or assisting students in resolving concerns that do not warrant referral.

Typical advising that does not warrant referral includes situations where the student feels caught between University red tape or contradictory policies and procedures; lacks knowledge about the University and its scope; or seeks guidance in learning better decision-making and goal setting skills.

In part, the Center's mandate charges it to assist and counsel undergraduate students regarding academic concerns and problems. In that capacity, it serves as a primary link between students and other resources, including faculty advisors, either when dealing with problems or when designing plans that can avoid them.

In his Mission Statement regarding undergraduate education, President Coor emphasized the need for students' opportunity to identify and clarify their own personal goals and to develop ways of achieving them. This describes the kind of assistance the Advising Referral Center currently offers students.

Some of the students who particularly need assistance in defining and solving academic problems are those who are undecided about a major. It was recognized by the President's Committee on Academic Advising, through its recommendations to the President in 1975, that undecided students need a different type of advising than those committed to a specific major or educational program. It was further suggested by the Committee that there was a need to develop a central location for advising these students. This segment of students includes the Undeclared Students, a specific group in those colleges that define such a category, who have not named an academic major. There are also a large number of unofficial undecided students, who are not sure what major field of study they want to pursue but have arbitrarily listed one on their record. They may do so because their college does not provide an option for the Undeclared status.

One of the basic assumptions underlying the need for a different type of advising for undecided students is that they have a greater potential for withdrawal and overall dissatisfaction with their educational life than the student whose choices are clear. A second basic assumption is that the undecided student needs more

intensive advising, particularly in decision-making and goal setting opportunities, exploration of education options and career exploration.

In the Center, undecided student advising is structured to help those students become aware of their own decision-making process; identify personal and academic goals; recognize their responsibility in the advising process; and learn to live with the decisions they make regarding academia. At the present time, guidance is given to identifying and approaching resource people who are most qualified to deal with their specific questions.

II. Responding to requests from colleges/schools/departments or individual faculty for support and guidance in advising; and conducting seminars and workshops for faculty that will help them perform their advising role in a more effective manner.

The very existence of the Center promotes academic advising on a campus-wide basis. Competing priorities and interests (among teaching, advising, research, and service) make it difficult for administrators and faculty to maintain their perspective on the inter-relatedness of these priorities. Through its activities, the Advising Center helps maintain that perspective.

A University-wide advising office is in a unique position to understand students from a wider perspective on their educational experience. This larger perspective provides important data concerning the abilities and methods of various colleges, departments and advisors in responding and communicating student needs and demands. The information garnered from this holistic approach makes the Center an important resource for the academic units to use.

Assistance given to colleges by the Center is demonstrated through support of the College of Agriculture's concept of organizing student peers to work with faculty in an advising capacity. Specifically, this support included: (a) meeting

with the group of student peers, responding to their inquiries on how to develop a cohesive relationship with the faculty to whom they would be assigned; (b) meeting with the faculty to support their involvement and to discuss the potential of their program in promoting students' development; and (c) meeting jointly with the faculty advisors and student advisors to discuss specific details of the program. Particular emphasis was placed on ways advisors could make optimum use of resources outside their college or department, resources they might not ordinarily have discovered. This program has since been officially incorporated as an important component of the College of Agriculture's advising system. Faculty training, advocacy, evaluation and systemization remain promising but underdeveloped avenues that demand the director's full attention.

In the Spring '79 semester, the Center student/staff advisor implemented advising skills workshops for the 38 College of Agriculture peer advisors. Topics included: Introduction to Advising Skills; Four Phases of Advising; Application of Skills; and Implementing the Referral Process.

During the past year, the Center gave impetus to other advising programs such as the Student Advising in the Sciences program (SAS), sponsored by the University's Living/Learning Center. The goal of these workshops was to provide an opportunity for peer advisors to explore, comprehend and practice basic advisng skills. Additionally, case studies from the Center's files were used for describing the referral process and ways to utilize University resources.

Data collated from evaluations indicated that the objectives and goals for workshops were met. Subject content was seen as relevant to the needs of the peer advising program and peers indicated that they planned to incorporate the skills they had learned in their advising sessions.

The Advising Referral Center was identified as a primary resource and consultant for peer advisors in need of guidance.

III. Acting as a catalyst for colleges, schools and faculty when developing and evaluating their own academic advising missions.

The organization and subsequent implementation of the First National Conference on Academic Advising, and its follow-up seminars, are critical examples of ways in which the Advising Center catalyzed colleges and faculty to develop and evaluate their academic advising. Dr. Arns, Vice President for Academic Affairs at UVM, remarked in his address to the conference, that he was "...puzzled and troubled to learn that this was to be the first national conference." Indeed it was the first, but it has spurred on further efforts and a second national conference followed. Dr. Arns also observed that, "...we need to bring a renewed sense of direction and purpose to learning,...to find ways of improving the college experience," and further that he hoped, due to the conference, that each conferee would see new connections and ways of organizing diverse understandings."[3] In 1979, NACADA, the National Academic Advising Association was formed to foster these connections on a national basis.

The Advising Referral Center, through the activities of the initial academic advising conference and follow-up seminars geared toward UVM faculty and academic deans also fosters these connections. Below is a synopsis of the activities of the Academic Advising Seminar, which has composed of 30 faculty with University-wide representation.

After discussions and identification of issues, the faculty group agreed on a goal statement. The goal was to impact on the attitudes and behaviors of faculty, students and central administration to such a degree that academic advising becomes a more effective part of the educational process, and to ensure that as a University process it is mutually beneficial to students and faculty while enhancing the credibility of the University community. The agenda was defined as follows:

Step 1. Develop statements which define outcomes of an advising relationship. (Completed)

Step 2. Rank order these statements within categories, according to their relative importance to successful advising. (Completed)

Step 3. Pilot the list with a larger sample of faculty. The pilot is to be carried out by the Advising Center during the Spring, 1979. Concurrently, encourage faculty to seek guidance from the Advising Center in developing sample instruments to pilot with their own advisees. (Completed)

Step 4. Seek University-wide agreement on the indicators of successful advising. (Data being collated)

Step 5. Prepare a final list of outcome statements, thus defining the UVM criteria of successful advising. (In progress)

Step 6. Develop an evaluation instrument(s) for use by the University administration, college or faculty. (In progress)

As all of the examples in Sections I, II, and III illustrate, each meeting and workshop with faculty members and administrators has acted as a catalyst for further advising activity.

IV. Making other areas of the University aware of special student groups and, when appropriate, responding to the needs of these students.

Cooperative efforts with academic and non-academic units (for example, with Residential Life, Admissions, Dean of Students Office, Counseling and Testing, Financial Aid and Academic Dean's Offices) include publishing materials and insuring that current information is available to students and faculty. Some examples of these efforts are:

A. Special Groups

Information for Non-Traditional and Re-Entry Students
The Center collaborates in an effort with Continuing Education and Orientation to provide information concerning advising resources for these student groups. Co-sponsored the Advising Day for Continuing Education students.

"Friends-On-Campus", in cooperation with Residential Life. Designed to help off-campus students, particularly the transfer students become more involved in on-campus activities. The Center collaborates with the Faculty Development Center in the planning and implementation of seminars focused on current advising themes.

B. Publications

Straight Talk, a handbook of undergraduate course descriptions, developed with the College of Arts and Sciences which is responsible, in part, for a 65% reduction in the number of add/drop requests processed each year. All colleges and schools at the University financially supported this publication.

Transfer Student Handbook, developed cooperatively with Admissions, Registrar's Office and Residential Life. This handbook won an award of excellence in publications from NODAC during its 1978 national conference.

Minority Student Handbook, subtitled: This is Our World! Welcome to It, published as an aid in the recruitment and retention of minorities. It also serves to help substantiate the impact of minority students on campus. Produced in collaboration with Black and Third World Educators, Financial Aid, Admissions, and Minority Students.

C. Information

Survey, A two-year study of transfer students' needs and demands. The survey was developed in conjunction with Financial Aid, Admissions, Registrar's Office and Residential Life, in order to identify problematic procedures and policies. Examination of the data has resulted in changes in the priority ranking for on-campus housing, separate orientation activities, and the development of a transfer student handbook.

Information Bank of college/department/school policies and programs, developed as an aid to students and faculty in academic planning. Continually up-dated handbooks detail current policies and procedures, academic programs, educational options and other pertinent information about the college. Information handbooks are an important tool for students and advisors, particularly when students are undecided about some aspect of their programs or are in the process of designing academic programs.

MEETING GOALS AND EVALUATION OF ACTIVITIES

The Center continues an ongoing evaluation of the activities established to meet its goals. The Center will have been in full operation for two years on July 1, 1979. During this time, a working relationship with academic deans, faculty, and central administration as well as student personnel services has been established.

As the Center continues to receive feedback from students, faculty and administrators, the data enable it to identify trends on a University-wide basis, to refine the questions asked about the advising process, and to continue to improve that process.

Appointment of the Center's director to selected University committees enhances information exchange opportunities and thus strengthens communication links. The various committee appointments facilitate dialogue on issues that are crucial to maintaining consistency of treatment of students throughout the University.

PROJECTED GOALS

The Center is charged with growth and change in response to University needs. The projected goals to meet these needs are listed below:

1. In the interests of a pro-active rather than re-active advising system (preventive vs. corrective), more emphasis will be placed on working with faculty and administrators who advise students.

   To ensure better informed, more visible, more confident and committed advisors, the following activities are either planned or implemented:

   a) Orientation Day for new faculty, staff and administrators who advise students and for established advisors who would like to improve their advising functions and potential.

   b) Workshops/seminars on a departmental/college basis which are designed to help forward their unique advising activities and to ensure compatibility with the University-wide system.

   c) Organization of a core group of advisors with particular sensitivity and interest in advising. The core group will serve as consultants to their own departments/colleges and the Advising Center while helping to educate their peers in the advising role.

   d) Implementation of advising skills training sessions for faculty and others who advise students.

2. The Center will collaborate with colleges to develop a system of advising the undecided student whose particular needs and concerns transcend the parameters of any one college/school or department.

   To ensure more appropriate advising for this group, the following activities are either suggested or implemented:

   a) Workshops for students on decision-making and related skills. The Center director is currently teaching a one credit module through the College of Education and Social Services entitled: Decision-Making Skills. During the Fall 1979 semester, a three credit course entitled: Theory and Practice of Values Clarification in Decision-Making will evolve from the module experiment.

   b) Development and recommendation of a University-wide Survival Skills course that awards general university credit to students.

   c) Exploration of Computer Based Adjunctive Advising as an aid in student self-advising and the up-date of information resources.

   d) Continued identification of faculty who would be particularly sensitive to the needs of undecided students.

   e) Develop better means of identifying and tracking the undecided student.

CONCLUSIONS

Review of program activities as detailed in this self study report, can guide a department in a more efficacious utilization of its resources: physical, fiscal, and individual. Equally important, it places central administration into an open and collaborative partnership with program areas. Enhanced relevancy, directionality, and commitment to programs are desired outcomes of the total review process.

Other beneficial outcomes include greater knowledge of the functions as well as limitations of the programs and an intensified awareness of the relationship between the University's various programs and departments. Ultimately, the students should be the benefactors of a self-examination as thorough as a Program Review process.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Robert Lawson, Associate Vice President for Research and Dean of Graduate College, Univeristy of Vermont (suggested in personal communication).

[2] Joseph E. Izzo, Chairperson, University of Vermont, Report of President's Committee on Academic Advising, 1975.

[3] Robert Arns, Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Vermont, Address to First National Conference on Academic Advising, 1977, p. 5.